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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 000717

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SRAP, SCA/FO, SCA/A, EUR/RPM
STATE PASS USAID FOR ASIA/SCAA

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [EAID](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: BADGHIS: SEIZING A TARGET OF OPPORTUNITY IN BALA
MURGHAB DISTRICT

Classified By: PRT and Sub-National Governance Director Valerie C. Fowler for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. This is an action request. See para 11.

Summary

12. (SBU) Badghis province's Bala Murghab district (BM) is fertile ground for immediate engagement and is emblematic of the opportunities for enhanced security, governance and development in the North and West of Afghanistan, even as the USG ramps up its activities in the South and East. PRT officers found in a recent visit to BM a surprisingly optimistic mood among its leaders and a readiness to cooperate with the international community in the wake of successful U.S. air-strikes that killed local Taliban leader Mullah Dastagir and other senior Taliban leaders in February 12009. Spanish officials similarly recognize the need to seize opportunities to work with local leaders and show results before the Taliban regroup, but are hamstrung from pressing ahead absent increased funding and new policy direction from Madrid. One project requiring immediate attention is the completion of the military logistic bridge that was opened at the end of November 2008 but requires additional work. We also recommend that the prospects for additional resources/assistance in Badghis be included in the agenda when President Obama and Prime Minister Zapatero meet April 6.

Bala Murghab (BM): Ready for Change

13. (SBU) In the wake of successful U.S. air-strikes that killed local Taliban leader Mullah Dastagir and other high-level Taliban leaders in February 2009, with no civilian casualties, the BM district administrator and local elders expressed to PRT Qal-e Naw representatives a willingness to engage in a broader governance discussion with GIROA. They said they wish to stabilize and rebuild BM and put themselves on a pro-government trajectory in place of the previous three years of Taliban domination. The positive developments in BM, if seized upon, could provide a template for improved security, governance, and development in other areas in the region. The BM elders were candid that some of their sons were members of the Taliban, but they maintained that as elders of the community, they had the influence to control their community youth and ensure the safety of development and governance activities. (Note: This is probably true to a point, but there are Taliban activities that have been beyond their ability to control.) The tone of discussions between the PRT and local leaders, and the fact that they took place at all with a female PRT officer in this conservative Taliban foothold in the northwest, suggest there may be a window of opportunity to significantly reduce the level of insecurity in BM and increase the GIROA's presence

in the district through tangible development projects.

¶4. (SBU) The recent change in attitude is already having a positive spill-over effect in counterinsurgency efforts. Communities in the area increasingly are providing good information to Coalition Forces on insurgents, IEDs, and potential future attacks. Foreign Taliban elements have been asked to leave BM's Tahti Bazaar community by local leaders, and initial reports suggest that these elements have indeed moved to areas outside BM. The remaining "local" Taliban are predominantly unemployed local youth who lack the technical and ideological training that dominates more heavily conflicted areas of Afghanistan. However, the possibility of a resurgent Taliban presence remains, with several individuals vying to be the successor to Dastagir as the Taliban shadow governor, including his brother, Mullah Ismael (who was injured in the operation and continues to recuperate in a nearby village) and Abdul Haqqani. There is talk that a Taliban delegation may be sent from Quetta to appoint a successor, but division and suspicion of an informant in the ranks are hindering this.

¶5. (SBU) Presently, about 87 ANP are assigned in BM and about 100 ANA troops are in the BM Forward Operating Base (FOB) in the center of BM. Most of the ANP in the province are untrained, but the U.S. military has nominated ANP officers in many of the Badghis districts as candidates for FDD (Focused District Development) in the upcoming rounds of training. Current regional ISAF leadership has given positive indications through its Spanish representatives in Badghis and Kabul that they understand the need for enhanced efforts in the province but have also indicated that they are

KABUL 00000717 002 OF 003

seeking guidance from Madrid on funding and next steps. In the province as a whole the Spaniards are spending about 20 million euros and they plan to increase the budget this year; however, AECID, the Spanish aid agency, will not work in an area that is not secure. While a 20-man U.S. police mentoring team (PMT), as well as a rotating unit of Italian soldiers that will be replaced by the Spanish in mid-April, is operating from the FOB, the Spanish civilians in the PRT have made it clear that their policy limitations will prevent them from overseeing any projects in BM. Delayed provision of resources to BM could result in losing the window of opportunity to get it right in a region of ethnic tensions, insecurity and lack of development.

¶6. (SBU) The provision of U.S. CERP funds to the PRT would create additional flexibility to move projects forward quickly at a time when local leaders are open to cooperation with the international community and GIROA. In addition, the USG PRT representatives (State and AID) are prepared to work out a rotating schedule that allows for a continuous civilian presence in BM, based at the FOB, provided that RC-West is prepared to provide air support to assist them and their Spanish development agency counterparts. Moving quickly to maintain and expand the inroads that have been made in BM also will enhance the potential for successful elections.

Repairing the BM Bridge

¶7. (SBU) One project that has led to increased skepticism among a population already weary of the GIROA and international community's development and security efforts is the ISAF/Italian bridge in BM. Structurally, the bridge was not built to the original design and HESCO barriers on the western side of the bridge have been washed out by flooding. (Note: The bridge is a sore point for Spanish officials who believe the Italian government should pay for structural repairs given their failure to construct the bridge properly.) From a security standpoint, the Taliban have had free reign to use the bridge due to the lack of checkpoints to protect those using the bridge. From a public relations standpoint, the local community perceives the bridge as

ISAF's installation of a bridge for the Taliban to use so as not to suffer attacks to the FOB, located where the old bridge used to egress. Finding a solution would provide a down payment on building better relations with the people of BM.

Spanish Reviewing BM Funding and Support

18. (C) In discussions with COMISAF's POLAD, the Spanish Ambassador in Kabul indicated that he had become more open to increased assistance to BM, given the recent death of Dastagir. Ambassador Turpin said that he would recommend to Madrid that the Spanish PRT at Qal-e Naw engage with elders and community leaders to end insurgent activities. This would involve providing economic incentives, something of which previously he had been skeptical given the fact that elders had allowed Dastagir to remain at large. He stressed that in any discussions the PRT should be hard-nosed, demanding that the elders take responsibility for security in BM. The Ambassador said he would be sending a cable, but he had doubts about how open Madrid would be to this path. "Still, we should push," he said. On March 18, Ambassador Turpin reported to ISAF POLAD that he had good news. Initial reactions to his message to Madrid were positive and he said he should have confirmation within the week.

19. (C) The Spanish Ambassador urged the U.S. Embassy in Madrid to engage at the political level to request Spanish policy makers to consider increased assistance and possibly troops in Badghis Province, although the latter would be difficult given the legacy of Iraq and the subway bombings in Madrid. The Ambassador then asked about the possibility of drawing on some of the U.S. forces to be deployed this year. Continuing, the Ambassador said that while not proud of the Spanish record in Badghis, the Spanish forces there have not received much help from RC (West). Security, he said, was an ISAF/RC (West) responsibility and the current record was disappointing. He concluded that there cannot be socio-economic development without security.8 COMMENT: There is some tension between the Spanish PRT and the RC (West) command. If more is to be done in Badghis, it will be necessary to bring in the Italians as well as the Spaniards. END COMMENT. The Ambassador reported that Presidents Obama and Zapatero will meet April 6. He suggested that a discussion of additional Spanish resources/assistance to

KABUL 00000717 003 OF 003

Afghanistan should be included in the agenda (whether or not to specifically include BM would need to be determined).

Comment

110. (SBU) Bala Murghab, together with its neighbor to the north, Ghormach, long have been a no-go zone -- the picture book example for the West and North of destabilizing "Pashtun pockets."8 The instability caused by these districts has, over time, spread to fairly peaceful Faryab province, leading to military operations in Ghormach and the transfer of that district to RC-North, both because of easier military access as well as the strong interest of the Norwegians in Maymaneh in tackling the source of growing instability in their area. Efforts to make progress on the ring road in this north-west part of the country have also been hampered by the situation in these districts. While Pashtuns in this area of Badghis have always guarded their independence, local elders insist they are presently open to assistance from outside, including foreign elements, now that the insurgents led by Dastagir have been at least temporarily sidelined. The situation in BM is a striking example of a targeted problem with larger strategic implications - whether in stymieing the ring road or seriously undermining the security in a much larger area. While we should press our Spanish allies to do more now, we might also consider whether quick impact investments of our own would make the difference in effecting far-reaching

change before the opportunity evaporates.

Action Request

¶11. (C) That the Department instruct Embassy Madrid to approach appropriate level authorities in the GOS and ask them to consider providing additional resources to the Spanish PRT in Qal-e Naw in order to engage with local elders/leaders. The Department also may wish to consider including this subject in the agenda of the April 6 meeting between President Obama and Prime Minister Zapatero.

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